

Chapter 16

Understanding Cross-cultural Communication

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The need for cross-cultural communication skills arises whenever people from different languages and cultures come into contact. With increased tourism, international business, students studying overseas, and increasing awareness of indigenous minority cultures there is concern to foster better communications among different cultural groups. In the present paper, examples of cultural differences in communication in Australia and New Zealand are presented. Two approaches to the training of cross-cultural communication skills are described: the cultural assimilator developed by Brislin, and McCaffery's "learning how to learn" orientation.

In nearly all countries in the South Pacific, many people need to communicate with, or understand, people who speak a different language or dialect, and who have a recognisably different style of communication. In Melanesia, communication with people who speak a different language or dialect is a way of life due to the number of different languages and dialects spoken in the region (Benton, 1981). As well, with the number of visitors arriving as tourists, or for business purposes, intercultural communication and understanding has been a topic of increased interest in recent years (e.g., Gudykunst, 1983). While many such contacts will be of brief duration, some will be sustained over a longer period. For people experiencing extended contact with a culture different from their own, understanding of and adjustment to cultural differences will determine the degree to which satisfying social relationships develop over time.

The purpose of the present paper is to outline some examples of cultural differences in communication in two South Pacific countries, Australia and New Zealand, and to describe two approaches to the learning of cross-cultural communication skills. In order to gain an understanding of the variation in patterns of communication among cultural groups, two examples of specific communication rules and practices among particular cultural groups are outlined, followed by a description.

Australian Aborigines and Europeans

Webber has described some important differences between Anglo-Australians and Aborigines in relation to eye-contact or "looking behaviour." As Europeans apply only fairly general rules about looking behaviour, have few restrictions on looking at females, and limited sexual taboos associated with direct eye contact, difficulties frequently arise in cross cultural contact with Aborigines. The structure and conduct of much of the schooling for Aborigines for example is based upon European models that precipitate such problems. Students are expected to look at the teacher when speaking, or being spoken to in order to demonstrate attention. Few teachers realize that direct looking in this manner may breach sexual taboos thereby making the situation difficult for some students. Disinterest and apathy may be exhibited as a defence against anxieties raised in this manner but may be viewed as inability to do the work by the teacher. (Webber, 1978, pp. 63-64)

In describing differences between Anglo-Australians and Aborigines, von Sturmer (1981) gave details of the culturally appropriate way to approach an Aboriginal person or group. Aborigines have a general notion that people should not "sneak-up" on others. Approaches should be made publicly and formally, especially to strangers.

It is customary for people to approach others in fits and starts, especially if they are a bit unsure of their ground...this is the way that one approaches sites or ceremonial shades. In these cases the leader of the party will often stop at regular intervals and call out...to the group assembled in the shade...At night people will never approach to a person's camp or house without making a sound to attract attention. During the day the same procedure may be followed and it is easily observed that there is a careful avoidance of direct facial contact. The approaching person makes guarded glances in the direction of the person he wishes to talk to (von Sturmer, 1981, p. 15).

Polynesians and Pakeha in New Zealand

In a detailed description of the differences between Pakeha (Europeans) and Polynesians in New Zealand, Metge and Kinloch (1978) gave some specific examples of the ways in which cultural differences in communications styles can lead to understanding. They have described a number of ways in which Polynesians and Pakeha differ in the extent to which they respond to non-verbal communication (such as the use of facial expressions and gaze patterns), greeting behaviours, signs of hospitality and ways of showing embarrassment. The following examples illustrate some of these differences.

... Maoris and Samoans emphasize 'body language' more and verbalization less than Pakehas. Pakehas... typically find Maoris and Samoans unresponsive and "hard to talk to"...To Maoris and Samoans, Pakehas often seem deaf to what others are trying to tell them, while at the same time they are "forever talking". (p. 10)

A Pakeha infant teacher related how she found she was continually repeating herself to her predominantly Polynesian class. She established that she was doing it in response to the raised eyebrows gesture which she had interpreted as "Please say it again", and realized that they were in fact signalling "Yes, we understand". (p. 11)

Maoris and Samoans...consider it impolite to look directly at others when talking to them...they rest their gaze elsewhere, slightly to one side, on the floor, ceiling or distant horizon...behaviour intended to avoid offence is often "read" by Pakehas with other ideas as rudeness or shiftiness. (Metge & Kinloch, 1978, p. 13)

Food plays an important part in greetings and extending hospitality to guests among Polynesian groups. Often food is provided immediately after formal greeting are completed. As Metge and Kinloch note, Maoris and Samoans do not offer food to guests, they provide it (1978, p. 19). Guests are called to the dining room to eat food that is already laid out for them. In contrast, when Pakeha ask Maori or Samoan visitors if they would like tea or coffee, the visitors often feel the hospitality is rather lukewarm, and may politely refuse anything.

Another situation where Polynesians and Pakeha differ is in greeting behaviours. For example Maoris and Samoans often comment that they attended a school function or meeting, where they were eager to be involved, and report that nobody spoke to them so they didn't go back (Metge & Kinloch, 1978, p. 15). In this situation Maori and other Polynesian groups emphasize "inclusiveness" where people are made to feel part of the group by being explicitly welcomed into it (Graves & Graves, 1985). Polynesians expect that newcomers will be personally greeted and made to feel welcome by the organizers of an event before the formal business commences. This pattern is clearly shown among Maori communities when visitors are welcomed on to a marae with a formal greeting or mihi. After the greeting speeches the hosts meet all of the guests in a reception line. At informal Maori social functions a newcomer will generally be introduced to, or greet, each person in the room.

In contrast, many Pakeha expect that at larger gatherings or public meetings the initiative for introductions and strangers getting to know one another is left to individuals. If any welcome is extended it is done briefly and in general terms by the chairperson at the start of formal business of

the meeting. At a smaller social gatherings, a newcomer may be introduced to people already there as a group, without individual introductions, or only to one or two people among those already present.

These examples of cultural differences in expectations about appropriate behaviours in a range of situations indicate that such differences can often be misinterpreted and may cause misunderstanding or offence. Cultural differences in the examples outlined above have been presented as clearly distinguishable differences. However, situations involving people from different cultures are frequently ambiguous. That is, several interpretations about what is “culturally appropriate” behaviour may be plausible.

In order to avoid misunderstandings between people from different cultures, the rules for what is culturally appropriate behaviour can often be determined from the particular setting or environment in which the behaviours occur. For example, on a marae, one should avoid behaviours, which are likely to cause offence to Maori people (such as sitting on a table), even though such behaviours may be perfectly acceptable among Pakeha people. People who bicultural or multicultural, and thus familiar with patterns of social behaviour in other cultural groups, may show different social behaviours in different settings. Such variation can be seen as a socially skilled pattern, rather than being seen as inconsistency.

Solidarity and deference politeness

Scollon and Scollon (1980, 1981) have described two contrasting styles of social interaction, which they labelled *solidarity politeness* and *deference politeness*. They developed the idea for these two styles from their observations of interpersonal behaviours among an indigenous Alaskan people, the Athabaskans, and American English speakers.

Solidarity politeness is a form of interaction which endeavours; to reduce status differences (or assumes little or no status differences) and emphasises “getting to know” the other person and increasing social intimacy (low distance). It is an intrusive form of social interaction in the sense that it requires reciprocating responses from the other person.

Deference politeness is a pattern of social interaction which maintains distance and respects privacy by assuming differences between the participants and the need to resist intruding on the other person’s “personal world.” These two styles differ in assumptions about three central communication characteristics; (a) the amount of intrusion into the other person’s “personal world” which is acceptable, (b) the extent to which status differences are expected to influence behaviours, and (c) the extent to which participants are assumed to differ in personal and social characteristics. These differences can be illustrated in two aspects of oral communication.

Who speaks first.

When an Athabaskan and a speaker of American English talk to each other, it is very likely that the English speaker will speak first. The English speaker will feel that talking is the best way to establish a relationship. The Athabaskan will feel that it is important to know the relationship between two people before speaking.

Exchange of speaking turns.

Among English speakers, when one person finishes speaking the other person can take a turn. If the other person does not say anything, then the first speaker can take another turn. However, Athabaskans have a different system for pausing between turns. They allow a longer pause between sentences than do English speakers. Thus the English speaker pauses for a short time and, if there is no response, carries on talking. From the Athabaskan perspective, the English speaker does not allow others to take their turn, and English speakers interrupt Athabaskan speakers before they have finished what they had to say. From the English speaker’s point of view, Athabaskans never seem to make sense or complete a coherent train of thought.

Deference politeness respects the other person's right to autonomy and self-determination. One tries not to speak for the other person or put words in his or her mouth. One does not speak too much or too fast, and sometimes one remains silent rather than impose on the other person, especially if they are of high status. Direct questioning is avoided.

When you assume solidarity with someone you notice and pay attention to the person, you exaggerate your interest in, approval of, and sympathy with the person; you claim in-group membership with the person, and speak as if you share a common point of view. You show that you know the person's wishes and are taking them into account, and you assume or assert reciprocity (Scollon & Scollon, 1980, p. 30).

In Australia and New Zealand it is common for people within the dominant Anglo cultural groups to emphasize egalitarian styles of social interaction in which differences in social status are downplayed or ignored (Fontaine, 1983; Ritchie, 1989). In some instances this egalitarian style may show itself as suspicion or criticism of those who strive for achievement or deviate markedly from other people within a social group. In Australia and New Zealand, criticism of those who achieve too much is referred to as the "tall poppy syndrome" (Veno, 1982) where those who stick out too much above the others are cut down to size. In New Zealand, the term "clobbering machine" is used to refer to the process of criticizing others who are too ambitious or too different in some way. These processes are a characteristic feature of a solidarity politeness style. Such processes are in direct contrast to other cultural patterns, such as among Maori and other Polynesia groups, and among East Asian cultures, where people routinely show deference to those having higher social status, and there is no assumption that social relationships should develop according to egalitarian principles.

Training cross-cultural communication skills

There is a growing realization among many people of the importance of acquiring the social skills, which help develop and maintain good relationships with members of other cultures. In Australia and New Zealand, for example, there has been a rapid increase in the number of businesses having staff whom speak Japanese during the 1980's. This is a marked change from previous attitudes to tourists from non-European countries, and has occurred because of the increasing economic importance of Japanese tourism. Increasing numbers of people now wish to learn the language and social etiquette of other cultural groups. The literature on cross-cultural communication training shows a wide range of approaches to learning culturally appropriate communication skills. Two general types of training are evident, those approaches which emphasize learning detailed information about particular culture(s) and those that emphasis learning general skills which are applicable to any cultural group. Some training programs combine both aspects; information about a specific culture and generalized skills learning. Two approaches are reviewed in the following section; the cultural assimilator, and McCaffery's "learning how to learn" approach.

The cultural assimilator

The cultural assimilator approach to culture learning has been described by Brislin (1986) and Albert and Adamopoulos (1980). It involves the use of critical incidents to which learners respond in order to find out an appropriate way to interpret specific interpersonal events. A United States example taken from the cultural assimilator, is as follows:

Mr Smith was a sixth grade teacher. He was a good teacher and liked by his students. He usually got along well with everybody and considered himself good at talking to them in a friendly manner. One day, during class, Mr Smith was talking to various students about the social studies topic for the day. Among the students to whom he talked was Nuria, a Spanish-speaking girl. When he spoke to her, Nuria only lowered her head and looked down at the floor without saying a word.

Why did Nuria lower her head?

1. Nuria was not at all interested in what Mr Smith was saying.

2. Nuria was showing her respect for Mr Smith.
3. Nuria has not done her homework and felt ashamed.
4. Nuria felt she was being reprimanded for something she had done. (Albert & Adamopoulos, 1980, p. 56)

When learners have selected one of the four responses, they turn to another page of the manual, where they are told to make another selection if they chose an inappropriate response (1, 3 or 4). If they selected the appropriate response (No. 2) they are told that in Latin American cultures teachers are highly respected and that students may show this respect by lowering their head and not looking at a person in a position of authority.

The cultural assimilator may focus on a specific culture (e.g. Honduras, Thai and Greek versions have been developed) or it may have a general focus for use across different roles (e.g. businessperson, foreign student, diplomats) and different countries (Brislin, 1986). The critical incidents selected can cover concepts such as anxiety, disconfirmed expectations, confrontation with one's prejudices and attributions about the behaviour of others.

McCaffery's learning how to learn orientation

McCaffery (1986) has proposed that cross-cultural training should "move people towards developing/enhancing skills they need to become independently effective cross-cultural sojourners" [visitors] (p.166). He contrasted this approach with others, which emphasize learning particular facts or a set of information. He is critical of orientation programmes, which rely on learning detailed information about a particular culture because such programmes create a dependency on "cultural experts" rather than encouraging independent learning by an individual experiencing a different culture.

"Gaining fluency" in another culture involves learning from the experiences and events of everyday encounters with people from the other culture. The process of "gaining fluency" requires the prior learning of both everyday life skills and communication skills. The following are examples of everyday life skills.

Observation - Looking critically and carefully at what is happening in cross-cultural interaction situations.

Self-reflection - Reflecting on how one's presence in a situation may be altering it examining how one's cultural values and filters might be affecting interactions or interpretations.

Transactions - Refining and adapting appropriate behaviour around daily transactions (getting taxis, changing money, buying vegetables, bargaining, learning time systems around appointments; learning skills to discover how transactions work.

Saying no - Assessing consequences of saying no in different situations and refining and adapting skills and tactics for doing so. An example might be not wishing to eat certain foods that are offered. (...if people do not feel they can say no, they often begin to entirely avoid those situations in which they might wish to say no.)

Responding to ambiguity - Realizing when one is in an ambiguous situation and choosing personally appropriate responses that are within culturally acceptable parameters. (McCaffery, 1986, p. 167)

Communications skills identified by McCaffery as relevant to cross-cultural communication include the following:

Initiating conversations - Finding topics of mutual interest and appropriate linguistic complexity in cross-cultural interactions.

Active listening - This includes paraphrasing, summarizing, restating, reflecting feelings and testing for understanding.

Non-verbal - Learning to read facial expressions, hand gestures, body language and the use of proximity. (McCaffery, 1986, p.167)

McCaffery has outlined in some detail an experiential approach to culture learning which emphasizes active involvement in the learning process, not merely passive exposure to information. In his view many cross-cultural training programmes have an over-reliance on information dissemination (lectures, presentations, question and answer sessions with “experts”). While such information may be useful, it doesn’t enhance skill development. He suggests the use of case studies, role plays, simulations, games, skills practice and living with a family from another country.

Conclusions

Cross-cultural communication skills are becoming increasingly seen as a primary attribute of socially skilled people, rather than an exotic diversion from the important things in life. While there has tended to be a major emphasis on language skills in learning about cultures, it is important to be aware of the full range of cultural differences in communication, in addition to language. Psychologists can play a role in the development of appropriate training programmes for people who wish to develop competency in, and understanding of, communication patterns in another culture. As well, an important avenue for future development will be providing training in cross-cultural communication and understanding throughout school curricula.

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